

July 24, 2016
Geraniums

The ubiquitous geranium. Look around in yards and on decks. Geraniums are the prima donnas of flowers and in mid summer they grace flower pots and yards in northern Minnesota. A writer for the New York Times, in response to a question on the care of flowers said, “Relax the geraniums will do just fine.” Maybe this is the reason geraniums are so widely appealing. They remain beautiful even adverse conditions.

Geraniums originated in either South Africa or the Mediterranean region. In Europe, they add color to homes and boulevards, a tradition carried to America by our European ancestors. Geraniums are widely grown in window boxes, in hanging baskets, and in pots on decks and patios. Geraniums are also attractive as edging plants when planted directly into the garden.

Geraniums are one of my favorite flowers because of the memories it evokes. A “brush” against the plant expels a characteristic odor that some people might find offensive; but for me, it conjures up memories of my mother’s and grandmother’s kitchens, the window sills adorned with a plant or two. The plant’s odors mixing with the aroma of fresh baked bread.

Geraniums, technically are considered to be perennials, members of the Geraniaceae family. In Minnesota, a representative of the perennial habit would be cranesbills, so named because the seed head resembles the head and beak of a crane. They are labeled in greenhouses either as “Cranesbills”, or “Cranes Bill”, or simply as a “perennial geranium”. Cranesbills are able to survive our winters outdoors and are some of the first plants to “green up” in the spring.

When you step into a Bloomers greenhouse you are met with a colorful display of potted geraniums. These “bedding” geraniums are the flowers we’re most familiar with and, botanically speaking, are Pelargoniums. The nomenclature of geraniums is a maze within a puzzle. There are reported to be 422 species. Then there are types within species such as zonals, stellars, scented, regals, and angels that differ in form and by

moisture and temperature requirements. Further, according to the International Geranium Society, there are literally thousands of varieties within these types. The names of varieties may change for different reasons such as a grower thinking they had developed a new plant or to avoid paying plant patent fees. The bottom line is a geranium name may be very confusing.

To bloom well, geraniums should be planted in an area that gets at least five to six hours of direct sunshine, preferably in the afternoon. Blooming will occur with less light but tends to be very sparse. Another important criteria is to plant into well drained soils because most geraniums are susceptible to diseases caused by soil fungi that thrive in wet soils. Containers must have drain holds to allow for the free flow of excess moisture. Avoid placing trays under outdoor pots that trap and allow water to wick up into the containers.

Use only fresh “sterilized” or commercial potting soil for potted plants. If water doesn’t drain readily, mix the soil with additional Perlite, Vermiculite or clean sand at the rate of two or three parts potting soil to one part of the soil amendment. Never put garden soil in a container as it may contain disease organisms, weed seeds, or insects and their eggs. Additionally, garden soil tends to have a “lumpy” texture when placed into containers.

Geraniums are relatively modest in their need for fertilizer. But, there are different opinions as to how much fertilizer to use. An excess of fertilizer, particularly nitrogen, can result in lush leafy growth but few flower clusters. Some experts advise fertilizing geraniums, growing in containers, every three weeks with a mild liquid fertilizer, such as “Miracle-Gro”.

If geraniums are planted in the garden, prepare the soil, prior to planting, by incorporating two pounds of 10-10-10 (or similar) fertilizer per 100 square feet. Then work about half that amount into the soil around the plants about mid-July. Or, if it’s difficult to work in a granular fertilizer, switch to a liquid fertilizer. Some information suggests a teaspoon per gallon of water of 20-20-20 (or similar percent) every time you water. Higher in price but easier to use.

Just as you would regularly give a bath to a pet dog to keep it clean and shiney, you must “deadhead” geraniums to keep them beautiful and blooming. Break off or clip stems of faded flowers. These flower parts have matured and have become brown, faded, and unattractive and, in some varieties, have developed seeds which tends to slow blooming. Remove any yellowing or dry leaves, together with spent stems, that may become infected with fungal organisms, particularly in rainy, damp weather.

You can bring the plants indoors in the winter and enjoy them as houseplants and keep them actively growing or hold them over until next spring. Geraniums, technically, do not have a dormant season when grown in warmer climates. In cold Minnesota geraniums are forced to become dormant by withholding the three things they need for active growth: sunlight, water, and warmth. Put them somewhere out of the light, water them sparingly and place them somewhere cool where they are protected from freezing temperatures and frost.

There are many choices of color and forms in geraniums. I personally tend to favor the red geraniums, my favorite being Calliope, a dark red variety. A friend, whose company developed this variety, claims this is the darkest red of any geranium. The foliage is dark green and the blossoms are a vibrant red. A gorgeous plant for gardens or containers. However, there are other colorful plants in the Rocky Mountain or American Splash series that range in color from orange, salmon, and white.

As Oscar Wilde, the Irish poet, playwright, and writer once said. “If I do live again I would like to be as a flower – no soul but perfectly beautiful. Perhaps for my sins I shall be made a red geranium.”

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